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ABSTRACT

A study to determine on-campus participatory behavior among students at the University of Malaya is reported. The university is a coeducational, primarily undergraduate institution with an enrollment of just over 5,000. Entrance is gained through a stringent national examination; once admitted, students are virtually guaranteed graduation. During the time of the sample (late 1960s), the student body was predominantly Malays and Chinese, but also included some South Indians, Pakistanis, and Eurasians. Because Malays control the political system, practically all Malay students receive government scholarships and preferential treatment in obtaining employment in the civil service. In addition, males are accorded higher status than females in that society. Almost 2,000 participants, representative of first year and final year students, comprised the sample. Three variables which serve as indicators of participatory behavior were examined: membership in organizations, frequency of social interaction with others discussing society's problems and politics, and participation in student strikes and demonstrations. Chinese students, regardless of sex, tended to be less actively engaged in these activities than Malays and others of either sex. Finally, the families' socioeconomic status was not strongly related to the three behavioral indicators. (Author/KC)

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INVOLVEMENT IN STUDENT LIFE:

STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

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INVOLVEMENT IN STUDENT LIFE: STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA[1]

Introduction

The attitudinal orientations and on-campus participatory behavior among the students at the University of Malaya during the late 1960s were affected by two major clusters of factors. One of these is the status accorded to university students as future members of the professional, technical, and executive elite in the society and the expected attitudes and behaviors associated with that status. The other cluster of factors involve the sentiments and values associated with their ascribed statuses based on ethnicity and sex. In this paper, we present analysis conducted to date on data gathered from almost 2,000 students at the University of Malaya in order to examine the relationships between these two clusters of variables and the participatory behaviors of students. We shall also analyze a few other attitudinal and behavioral indicators which are related to variations in participatory behavior among these students.

Participatory Behavior Among University Students: A Brief Review of Previous Studies

University and college students have been the subjects of much research interest in the United States. Their values, attitudes, religious beliefs, political ideologies, career aspirations, etc., have been studied by a large number of people over the years (see Feldman and Newcomb, 1969 for a useful summary of this body of research literature). More recently, Astin (1977) reported the results of a series of longitudinal studies of university and college students utilizing data collected from over 225,000 students. In

this brief review of the literature, we shall confine our attention to these two works since they are the most comprehensive works available.

One of the traditional lines of inquiry concerning involvement in student activities has been that of looking at variations in behavior based on social class origins. For example, Ellis and Lane's study of social integration among students at Stanford University revealed that lower class students were likely to be socially isolated and suffer acute loneliness during their undergraduate years at that rather elitist university (Ellis and Lane, 1967). On the other hand, Wegner (1973) reported that social class background, race or ethnicity, and sex did not make much difference in frequencies of social contact, participation in activities, and psychological distress among students at the University of Hawaii. Feldman and Newcomb (1969: 275-280) cite various studies which either showed that lower class university and college students were more likely than middle class students to be more isolated and unhappy or that the social class background of students made no difference in social involvement, satisfaction with university life or self-esteem.

Astin's inquiry into attitudinal and behavioral changes among university and college students is broad in scope and most of the more important relationships found are reported in the text. It is difficult, therefore, to discuss his findings which are relevant to this paper without considerable interpretation. Nonetheless, it would seem from his reporting of the data that ascribed characteristics are frequently not as good predictors of student behavior as are the student's personal experience, attitudes and institutional characteristics of the school he or she attends. Furthermore, the students' expectations or intentions as entering freshmen are often fairly good predictors of subsequent behavior.

Therefore, plans to join a fraternity or a sorority, is the most powerful factor (r = .28) associated with actual joining (Astin, 1977: 88). Other factors associated with membership in a fraternity or sorority are being a male and, during high school years, having received good grades, having been a varsity athlete, having been elected president of a student organization, and having published original writing. Students attending a nonselective Protestant college, a highly selective nonsectarian college, or a college in the South are most likely to join fraternities and sororities. Furthermore, women "are more likely to join sororities in coeducational than in women's colleges, and blacks are more likely to join fraternities or sororities in predominantly black than in predominantly white institutions" (Astin, 1977: 87).

Regarding involvement in student government while attending college, Astin found the student's interpersonal self-esteem was the strongest predictor of that behavior (r = .18). Other factors positively related to involvement are having been "president of a high school organization, frequent use of the library, religiousness, and altruism" (Astin, 1977: 91). Plans to participate in demonstrations is the strongest factor related to actually participating in such activity (r = .29) (Astin, 1977: 92). In comparing the characteristics of those who participate in either student government or demonstrations, Astin reports that "blacks, students high aspirations and students from highly educated families" are more likely to become engaged in both activities. Finally, he notes that a "given student is more likely to participate in demonstrations at a university or highly selective institution but less likely to become involved in student government" (his emphasis, Astin, 1977: 93-94).

This rather crude summary of Astin's findings illustrates the complexities involved with studying participatory behavior among college and university students. Ascribed characteristics, previous experiences, expectations, personality factors, and institutional characteristics combine to produce outcomes in ways which are often difficult to predict. Anticipatory socialization and some latitude in student choice of which institution to attend based on his or her proclivities often seem to reduce the effects of background variables on student behavior. On the other hand, it would seem that the extent to which there exists a lack of "fit" between student and institutional characteristics (which in turn produce certain behavioral outcomes) is also a variable which should be taken into account when studying student participation. Furthermore, generational differences between university cohorts constitutes another variable. The potential importance of this factor is illustrated by the good likelihood that the number of entering freshmen anticipating taking part in demonstrations has been very small in recent years. If, in addition to the above, one takes into account societal differences, the task of predicting variations in student behavior can become formidable. For this reason, we shall simplify our task in this paper by utilizing two theoretical frameworks as sensitizing devices for data analysis and interpretation.

One of the theoretical frameworks which seems useful for examining participatory behavior among college and university students is the one adopted by Ellis and Lane (1967). This framework involves hypothesizing that ascriptive factors can be important given certain contexts. For example, female students are likely to be less participatory than males if the campus life is dominated by males and if the majority of both sexes believe this should be so. Similarly, lower class students will be less participatory if

they, as well as the students from more privileged backgrounds, believe that lower-class students should not be socially mingling with their betters much less attend that particular university or college.

The other theoretical framework would posit that being a student at a given university or college equallizes status and reduces the importance of external statuses (e.g., see Meyer, 1970). Thus being a student at a highly prestigeous university or a low prestige community college confers a similar status to the student at a given school regardless of sex, race or social class origin. Variations in behavioral patterns would then be more attributable to personality, attitudinal, and experiential differences than to ascribed characteristics. For example, a student's participatory behavior might be more strongly related to past participation in high school than his or her sex, race or SES in certain types of post-secondary institutions.

Having briefly described the two theoretical frameworks which will serve as sensitizing aids to our data analysis and interpretation, we shall now describe some of the institutional characteristics of the university attended by the students in this case study.

The University of Malaya

The University of Malaya is located in one of the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and it was the sole university in the country at the time of this survey. Malaysia is a Southeast Asian nation of approximately 11 million located between Thailand and Indonesia. The University of Malaya is a coeducational, primarily undergraduate level university and relatively small in terms of its student enrollment when compared to our universities. There were only 5,236 undergraduate students officially enrolled in 1968 when our survey was conducted. This figure represents less than one percent of the 19 to 21

year olds (the average age distribution of university students in Malaysia) in the society during that year.

One of the major reasons for this relatively small percentage of university students in the population was the stringent nature of the national examination system inherited from the British which systematically prevented large numbers of students from being admitted into the next higher grade after being examined at what would correspond to 9th, 11th and post 12th grades in our high schools.[3] Thus, being a university student conferred special status to those who were admitted into the University of Malaya because the educational system was based on an elitist concept of who is eligible to receive higher education. Furthermore, partly because it was so difficult to qualify for admission, students were virtually guaranteed graduation once they were admitted. Attrition was almost non-existent and failure in the final examinations required for graduation was rare. The students, therefore, were not exposed to severe stresses from their academic work and due to the favorable job market in the country for those with university degrees, the vast majority could realistically anticipate high status employment or occupations upon graduation.

While the situation described above would suggest that status differences (especially those based on social class origins) were equallized among these students, there are some grounds for anticipating variations in behavior based on ethnicity and sex. Reflecting the ethnically diverse nature of the Malaysian population, the student body was predominantly Malays and Chinese, but also included South Indians, Pakistanis, Eurasians, etc. Malays are the politically dominant group in the country, but the non-Malays constitute almost 50 percent of the population and tend to be more urbanized and socio-economically advantaged as compared to the Malays. However, due to the fact

that Malays control the political system, virtually all the Malay students at the University of Malaya were recipients of government scholarships and they could also expect preferential treatment in obtaining employment in the government civil service. This was a situation which was (and still is) resented by many non-Malays and constituted a serious political issue in the society. Malays, on the other hand, viewed this and other prerogatives as a "right" and tended to be annoyed with the non-Malays for questioning the legitimacy of this situation (Means, 1970; Ratnam, 1965; Roff, 1967, Takei, 1971; and Takei, 1973).

In addition to a particular ethnic group enjoying special treatment in the country, the males, regardless of ethnicity were accorded higher status than females in that society. Both in the families and the society at large, it was generally assumed that males are the head of households and primary breadwinner. The adult female's role, even one with a university degree, was expected to be that of wife, mother, and possibly a contributor of a second income. For a family with limited resources, therefore, furthering a son's education had higher priority than that of a daughter's. Sending a daughter to a university was confined largely to those families that could afford such a luxury.

The Sample[4]

A survey questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in large classes during 1968. It was decided to confine the sample as much as possible to first and final year students. There were 3,134 first and final year students enrolled and the number of students who completed our questionnaire came to 1,906 or 61 percent. We were able to survey 79 to 98 percent of the target population in the Faculties of Agriculture, Engineering, Medicine and Science. Unfortunately, we were able to survey only 57 percent and 23

percent of the students enrolled in the Faculties of Arts and Economics and Administration. However, the ethnic and sex distributions of those surveyed in these two Faculties were quite similar to the official figures published by the University and so we are confident that we have a representative sample from these two Faculties.

The Variables

Since the original study was not intended to focus exclusively or participatory behavior, the number and quality of items relevant to this area of inquiry are not as comprehensive as those in Astin's study (1977). They, however, can serve as indicators of some forms of participation and will permit us to explore this aspect of student life on the University of Malaya campus.

The first indicator of participation is membership in organizations. The students were provided with a list of various types of organizations (political, cultural, religious, social, professional, etc.) and asked to check those of which they were a member. They were also asked whether or not they held an office in any of those organizations. Since these are dichotomous items, the socres were summed and the possible scores range from 0 to 8 with the higher numbers indicating greater participation in organizational activities.

The second indicator of participatory behavior involves frequency of social interaction with others discussing the society's problems and politics. This item which we will call "political interaction" taps both interest in societal issues as well as the presence of others with whom the student discussed such topics. The choices ranged from "almost everyday" to "almost never."

Taking part in student strikes and demonstrations will be the third indicator of participatory behavior. The choices for this item ranged from "none" to "four or more."

These three indicators of participatory behavior will be the focus of our data analysis in this paper. They are all positively correlated with each other. The correlations between membership in organizations and political interaction is .19; membership in organizations and participating in strikes and demonstrations is .22; and political interaction and taking part in strikes and demonstrations is .30.[5]

Results

We shall begin by examining the associations between the three indicators of participatory behavior and two ascribed characteristics of the students.[6] As can be seen in Table 1, males tend to be more participatory than females on all three indicators and especially so in discussing politics and taking part in strikes and demonstrations. If we look at the effects of ethnicity, it is clear that Chinese students, regardless of sex, tend to be less actively engaged in these activities than Malays and others of either sex.

The differences by sex can be explained by stating that political activities in Malaysia were defined as a realm generally reserved for males. The tendency for the male Chinese students to be less participatory than Malay and other males, however, is not explained as easily. It is possible that Chinese males tend to be emotionally and socially closer to their families than males from the other ethnic groups. This could lead to a tendency to focus their energies on academic pursuits and a perception that engaging in social activities is distracting their attention away from studying. Clearly further data analysis is needed to explain this pattern.

In addition to analyzing the associations between ascribed characteristics and participatory behavior, we also looked at the relationships between previous participatory behavior and behavior as university students. First of all, recalled participation in family decision-making while they were in Form 1 (comparable to our 7th grade) and an evaluation of its effect were combined to create an index of prior participation in the family. The correlation between this variable and student membership in organizations is .07; its correlation with political interaction is .06; and it is weakly correlated with taking part in strikes and demonstrations (.04). Next, we constructed an indicator of past participatory behavior in secondary school by combining number of student offices held and a self-rating on how active they were in extra-curricular activities. This variable is not only positively correlated with family participation (.10), but it is also a fairly good predictor of joining organizations as university students (.19). Past participation in secondary school is also correlated with discussing politics (.13) and taking part in strikes and demonstrations (.10).

When our three indicators of participatory behavior were examined in terms of factors related to the students' exposure to the university environment, the following patterns became observable. Being a first or final year student does not predict any differences in frequency of joining organizations or discussing politics. However, final year students are more likely to have participated in a strike or demonstration (see Table 2). It does seem logical that being a student for several years provides greater opportunities to take part in strikes and demonstrations. The negative association between living on-campus and engaging in political discussion was unanticipated. Future analysis will need to separate those living with family or relatives from those living off-campus to see if this pattern is

still observable. As expected, students enrolled in the Faculty of Arts (comparable to our College of Liberal Arts) are more participatory than those in other Faculties.

Finally, we wished to examine the relationships between participatory behavior and certain attitudes or orientations. These attitudinal variables were assumed to be somewhat related to the three indicators of participation chosen for this discussion. The first variable was constructed from two items in the questionnaire which elicited the extent to which they felt free to complain to their lecturers if they were treated unfairly and their perception of whehter or not complaining to a lecturer would make any difference. The next variable is their level of satisfaction with the University of Malaya. Political alienation was selected as the third variable. This index was constructed out of two likert-type items--"I don't think people in the government care much what people like me and my family think" and "My family does not have much to say about what the government does and the laws it passes." These items are very similar to those used by the Survey Research Center at University Michigan and have identified by House and Mason (1975) as valid measures of political trust (which is an important component of political alienation) or disaffection with political policies and events. The last attitudinal variable is the students' political party preference. Since there were eight identifiable political parties in the society, we decided to simplify our analysis by dichotomizing this variable. Either the student preferred the political party which had won every general election since 1957 when independence was achieved or they preferred one of the opposition parties.

These four attitudinal variables are correlated with each other in a fairly logical manner. Willingness to complain to a lecturer and dissatisfaction with the

University of Malaya are negatively correlated (-.12). In other words, those who think they are free to complain about unfairness to a faculty member tend to be more satisfied with the University. Those who feel free to complain tend to be less alienated politically (-.07) but this correlation is low. Political party preference and willingness to complain are uncorrelated (.01). Those who are politically alienated tend to be more dissatisifed with the University (.13). There is a positive correlation between dissatisfaction with the University and preference for opposition political parties (.17). Finally, as anticipated, those who are politically alienated tend to prefer opposition parties (.18). What is surprising about this correlation is that it is not stronger. We suspect that this could be due to the fact that political distrust is generalized to include skepticism towards most politicians, including those in opposition parties.

Table 3 presents the correlations between the attitudes described above and the three indicators of participatory behavior. The relationships which merit noting are few in number. Willingness to complain to a lecturer is positively associated with membership in organizations (.09) and engaging in political discussions (.07). Dissatisfaction with the University is correlated with discussing politics (.11) and taking part in strikes and demonstrations (.10). Preference for an opposition party is related to discussing politics (.07) and participation in strikes and demonstrations (.09), but these correlations are much lower than what we would have predicted.

Summary

There is little to be gained by going over all the findings point-by-point. It seems more useful to make some general observations concerning this sample and topic. The differences in behavior by sex and ethnicity among

these students reflect to some extent the social structure and patterns in the larger society. The politically subordinate status of women in Malaysia is undoubtedly manifested by the lower incidence of female university students becoming involved in politically relevant activities. The tendency for Chinese students to be less active in non-academic activities could be an indication that their interests like those of their parents lie elsewhere. Future analysis should probably be aimed at looking at the relationship between father's interest in politics and the student's political interest and activities. Furthermore, it is also important to note a non-finding in our data analysis. That is, the families' socio-economic status was not strongly related to the three behavioral indicators used in this paper. There seems to be some justification then to say that either through anticipatory socialization or by university students being accorded a similar status as future members of the elite stratum in Malaysia, the student's social class background does not seem to be an important factor in affecting their behavior and the behavior of others towards them.

The last observation to be made here is that observed relationships between the kind of variables used here inevitably will be quite weak. This is because people take part in organizations and in other forms of social interaction for a variety of reasons. Attitudinal predispositions, former experience, reference groups, and even an unforeseen event like having a roommate who is actively engaged in a particular type of activity can influence a student in a certain way. However, the fact that most of the relationships observed are in the direction logic would dictate is somewhat heartening. What people do and think then, are not completely unpredictable, even in a society that is foreign to most of us.

1. This paper is part of a larger monograph on the University of Malaya students which is in progress. The data analysis for this monograph is being supported by the Center for the Study of Higher Education, The Pennsylvania State University. This writer wishes to express his gratitude to the Center and its Director, Kenneth Mortimer, for making this project possible.

2. For a more complete review of this body of literature, see Takei, et al., 1979.

3. We can only provide the barest outline here of the selection process in the Malaysian educational system. For a more detailed description and analysis, see Takei, 1971.

4. Those who wish to obtain a more complete description of the survey design and sample, see Takei, 1971.

5. Due to the size of this sample, correlations of .09 or higher are significant beyond the .001 level.

6. The socio-economic statuses (SES) of the students' families (as measured by father's occupation) were used also in analyzing the data, but SES was closely associated with sex and ethnicity--the vast majority of the students of low SES were male Malays. Furthermore, SES was a rather weak factor in predicting behavior and attitudes. For these reasons, it was decided not to present any data based on differences by SES.

TABLE 1

Associations Between Sex and Ethnicity with Membership in Organizations, Political Interaction, and Participation in Strikes and Demonstrations

	MEMBERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS			POLITICAL INTERACTION		PARTICIPATION IN STRIKES & DEMONSTRATIONS	
	None %	One %	Two or More %	Low %	High %	None %	One or More %
Males:							
Chinese (N=798)	36	35	29	58	42	55	45
Malay (N=454)	25	35	40	35	65	40	60
Other (N=131)	21	31	48	39	61	33	67
	gamma = .23			gamma = .37		gamma = .31	
Females:							
Chinese (N=300)	41	36	23	82	18	80	20
Malay (N=160)	39	40	21	57	43	75	24
Other (N=71	28	35	37	64	36	65	35
	gamma = .12			gamma = .41		gamma = .21	

TABLE 2

Associations Between Year at University, Student Residence and Faculty Enrollment with Membership in Organizations, Political Interaction, and Participation in Strikes and Demonstrations

	MEMBERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS			POLITICAL INTERACTION		PARTICIPATION IN STRIKES & DEMONSTRATIONS	
	None %	One %	Two or More %	Low %	High %	None %	One or More %
Year at University							
First Year (N=1167)	32	36	32	55	45	64	36
Final Year (N=746)	35	33	32	54	46	44	56
	gamma = -.02			gamma = .02		gamma = .39	
Residence While At University							
Off-Campus (N=1143)	34	36	30	51	49	57	43
On-Campus (N=761)	31	35	34	62	38	55	45
	gamma = .06			gamma = -.22		gamma = .05	
Faculty Enrollment							
Non-Arts (N=998)	35	36	29	62	38	61	39
Arts (N=914)	30	34	36	47	53	50	50
	gamma = .12			gamma = .30		gamma = .23	

TABLE 3

Correlations Between Selected Attitudes and Membership in Organizations, Political Interaction and Participation in Strikes and Demonstrations

SELECTED ATTITUDES	MEMBERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS	POLITICAL INTERACTION	PARTICIPATION IN STRIKES & DEMONSTRATIONS
Feels Free to Complain to Lecturers	.09**	.07*	-0.02
Dissatisfaction with University	-.02	.11**	.10**
Political Alienation	-.01	.02	.02
Political Party Preference	.02	.07*	.09**

* $p < .01$

** $p < .001$

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